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INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN PRIORITY 0293
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9984
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 6959
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5037
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3620
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0781
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3706
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1021
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2786
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7534
RUEHBBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5236
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0146
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1916
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000475

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA PDAS MANN, SCA/INS AND SCA/PPD

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PTER KPAO KDEM CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: SLOW STRANGULATION OF MEDIA FREEDOM

REF: A) COLOMBO 460 B) COLOMBO 439 C) COLOMBO 337 D)
COLOMBO 264

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Since the inauguration of President Mahinda Rajapaksa in November 2005, Sri Lanka's vibrant media has been slowly smothered by attacks on journalists, publishers and broadcasters by the LTTE and armed paramilitary groups with alleged links to the government security forces. The decline of human rights generally and the resulting "culture of impunity" have stoked the surge in intimidation, kidnapping and murder of journalists. The Government of Sri Lanka (GSL), invoking strengthened emergency regulations, has put pressure on editorial content and arrested journalists without charges. More recently, editors and broadcasters have received veiled threats by telephone allegedly from the top levels of the Rajapaksa government. As a result of direct and indirect harassment, four independent newspapers are likely to close in the next 90 days. End Summary.

JOURNALISTS CANDID AT AMBASSADOR'S MEDIA ROUNDTABLE

¶2. (C) On March 20, Ambassador met privately with seven of Sri Lanka's most influential media personalities from a wide range of outlets. The consensus among all participants was that pressure on the media is greater than it has ever been, even compared to other "low points" in the late 70s and early 80s. Convener of the Free Media Movement Sunanda Deshapriya stated that in the past, even when suppression of the media existed, there was still someone in authority who would listen and respond to media complaints. He added, "now we have nobody." The group spoke at length about the GSL's severe suppression of Tamil-language media. Priyani Gunaratna, Director of Rural Services for the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, told us that GSL pressure on Tamil media is island-wide, not just in Jaffna. The GSL is pulling all government advertising from Tamil language media outlets that it does not own. The group related widespread rumors that the GSL had also informed private enterprises that

advertising in non-government controlled Tamil media, as well as papers such as the Morning Leader that are critical of the GSL, was "unwise." Our interlocutors noted that although the allegation might be impossible to verify, it will likely have the effect of suppressing advertising in Tamil newspapers as fears of retaliation spread through the business community.

FURTHER EVIDENCE OF MEDIA INTIMIDATION

¶3. (C) In October 2006, a high-level five-member delegation from the International Press Freedom and Freedom of Expression Mission came on a two-day fact-finding and advocacy mission to Sri Lanka and released a statement. Their findings included a serious deterioration in the security situation for the Sri Lankan media; both parties to the conflict, but particularly paramilitary and militia groups such as the Karuna faction and the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), had engaged in threats, abductions and attacks on journalists. According to their report, eight media workers have been killed since August 2005. The delegation also took the GSL to task for the lack of progress in cases where evidence exists of the identity of the alleged killers. (Note: In Sri Lanka, few murders result in an arrest and trial. Further, of those murders that go to trial, the conviction rate is only 4%. As a result, it is easy to understand why journalists take even an implied threat to harm seriously.)

TAMIL MEDIA BEARS THE BRUNT OF THE PERSECUTION

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¶4. (SBU) The conflict and the restriction of media freedom have fallen disproportionately on Sri Lanka's Tamils. Seven of the eight murdered media workers have been Tamils. Tamil journalists are treated with suspicion by the security forces and those working for government papers are branded as traitors by the LTTE.

¶5. (C) Distribution of Tamil language papers in the Eastern province has been suppressed by the Karuna Group, which openly operates under arms in government-controlled areas (refs A, B). On October 23, 2006, armed gunmen stopped two vehicles in Batticaloa district and burned 20,000 copies of the Tamil language daily Virakesari. One of the gunmen confiscated a driver's cell phone and allegedly told him that he could pick it up at the Karuna political office in the next town. On March 19, the Editor-in-Chief of Virakesari, Mr. V. Thevaraj, told PolOff that with the government's help, the Karuna Group has completely ended the distribution of Virakesari in much of the East. Likewise, in July 2006, publishers of Tamil broadsheets Sudar Oli and Thinakkural suspended distribution in the East, citing threats from the Karuna Group. That same month, a group of armed men burned down the office of Virakesari's distributor on Batticaloa's main street.

¶6. (C) On August 29, 2006, radio producer Nadaraja Guruparan of Tamil-language radio station Sooriyan, or Sun FM, was abducted by gunmen in Colombo and held for 20 hours. Although he has not identified his abductors, Sooriyan FM no longer airs news magazine or interview programs. Popular Tamil-language TV host J. Sri Ranga was informed by police on November 12, 2006, that his life was in grave danger following an episode of his talk show "Minaal" about the assassination in Colombo, in broad daylight, of Tamil National Alliance parliamentarian Raviraj. After international interventions, the government provided a security detail, but Ranga reports that threats have continued with no police progress on the case. He is planning to leave Sri Lanka, at least temporarily.

¶7. (C) Television stations have also been feeling the heat. This matters, because about 60% of the population gets its

news for TV. Television journalists tell us, however, that the Majaraja Broadcasting Company, owned by a prominent Tamil, had been the only broadcaster covering press conferences critical of the government by former Foreign Minister Samaraweera, as well as stories on human rights violations and abductions. However, a senior executive of the Maharaja channel (protect) told us that President Rajapaksa had summoned the owner of the station to Temple Trees (equivalent to the White House). During a cordial chat, Rajapaksa was able to persuade Maharajah not to air any more programs on such sensitive topics.

¶8. (C) The Jaffna peninsula is heavily patrolled by more than 40,000 Sri Lankan soldiers, sailors and police. On May 2, 2006, while Sri Lanka was hosting United Nations World Press Freedom Day, 8-10 suspected paramilitaries attacked the Jaffna office of Tamil-language newspaper Uthayan, killing two and wounding four. The day before, Uthayan and its Colombo sister publication, Sudar Oli, had published a political cartoon lampooning EPDP leader Douglas Devananda as a shoeshine boy at the feet of President Rajapaksa. (Note: Although now formally registered as a political party, EPDP has been linked to extrajudicial killings and retains many characteristics of a paramilitary group. EPDP also reportedly carries on criminal activities such as extortion.)

The newspaper claims they gave the authorities the name of an EPDP leader suspected of carrying out the attack, but no investigation was conducted. On August 15, Sathasivam Baskaran, a distributor for Uthayan, was killed while distributing the newspaper in Jaffna during a one-hour relaxation of the curfew. He was the fourth Uthayan employee

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murdered in 2006. Three days later, Uthayan lost its stock of newsprint due to arson. With Jaffna virtually under virtual martial law, residents concluded that the murders and arson were carried out either by the GSL security forces or the EPDP.

¶9. (C) With the closure of the A-9 highway since August 11, 2006, newsprint and ink for Jaffna's two remaining Tamil-language newspapers have often been excluded from resupply shipments. As a result, the papers have reduced their editions to four pages, often eliminating advertisements to make room for news. In a February 2007 meeting brokered by Ambassador Blake between the owners of Uthayan and Yaarl Thinakkural and Minister of Disaster Relief and Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe, the GSL obtained verbal assurances that the newspapers would not be used to foment insurrection or to pass LTTE messages calling for strikes or other mass action. However, to date the newspapers have not been re-supplied and are expected to have to close by April.

SINHALESE MEDIA NOT IMMUNE FROM HARASSMENT

¶10. (SBU) Sinhala language newspapers and journalists have also begun making enemies both in and out of the government. On July 3, 2006, freelance journalist Sampath Lakmal de Silva became the first Sinhala language journalist to be murdered in eight years. Critical of all sides, De Silva had recently written reports that embarrassed elements of the security forces. His death remains unsolved.

¶11. (C) On November 23, 2006, police from the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) detained Parameshwari Munusami, a Sinhalese journalist working for Maubima or "Motherland" (ref D). The editor of Maubima alleged that President Rajapaksa personally requested that the paper not publicize the detention of its reporter. Maubima's fortunes took a turn for the worse on February 7, 2007, when President Rajapaksa sacked Foreign Minister Samaraweera, a close confidant of Maubima owner Tiran Alles. Maubima's critical coverage of the military campaign and support of Samaraweera has allegedly earned the ire of the President and his

brother, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa (ref C). Interlocutors report that the Rajapaksas have discouraged advertisers, harassed the editor, ordered frivolous audits of the paper and seized the passports of the owner and director.

On February 28, Maubima Director Dushyantha Basnayaka was taken into custody by TID. On March 13, President Rajapaksa, in his capacity as Finance Minister, ordered a freeze on the assets of Maubima's parent company, Standard Newspapers LTD. Maubima and its sister paper, The Sunday Standard, are expected to publish their last editions on March 25. On March 21, the Attorney General told the Supreme Court there was no evidence to hold Munusami and that no charges had been filed. The Court ordered her release, which was televised when it took place the following day. Given the intense public interest in her case, it is not likely that she will be re-arrested soon on the same or similar charges.

IF YOU CAN'T SAY ANYTHING NICE...

¶12. (C) Numerous interlocutors of the public affairs and political sections have reported that owners, directors, editors and reporters in all media and in all languages are receiving anonymous threats. Moreover, they have also received unsolicited "friendly" advice from senior administration officials, including police Deputy Inspectors General, Army Commanders, Cabinet Ministers, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa and even the President. The

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cause of such high-level attention appears to be unwelcome reporting on human rights issues such as murders, abductions

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and disappearances, but may also result from stories on the malodorous financial dealings of the Rajapaksa brothers or those close to them.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador made public visits to the Colombo offices of Thinakkural and Sudar Oli (Uthayan's sister paper) to show support for these Tamil newspapers. The Ambassador and other Embassy officers have repeatedly urged the President and other senior Cabinet members to take concrete steps to safeguard media freedom. We have also advocated passage of a Media Freedom law first proposed in 2003, which would offer additional protection to journalists. The bill lapsed in 2004 with the election of a new Parliament and government, however, and its prospects for passage in the near future are uncertain at best.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: The next several weeks are likely to see the extinction of four independent newspapers in Sri Lanka: Maubima (circ. 64,000) Sunday Standard (circ. 25,000), Thinakkural (circ. 12,000) and Uthayan (circ. 22,000). Equipped with the powers of warrantless arrest and unlimited detention under the stiffened emergency regulations, the government appears intent on silencing its most vocal critics. The stifling of independent voices through coercive means, both legal and extralegal, is having a profound impact on Sri Lanka's previously vibrant media landscape and civil society as a whole.

BLAKE